

Chamberlain Memorial

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Owen and I were University of Chicago graduate students during the same postwar period, the two of us both arriving from Los Alamos for the Chicago 1946 Spring Quarter. Although not close friends, there was frequent contact between us at Chicago because of Enrico Fermi. Owen and I had become acquainted with and taken courses from Fermi at Los Alamos, where Owen was an assistant to Emilio Segre and I an assistant to Edward Teller. (Because of working in different research groups at Los Alamos on entirely different problems, Owen and I there had almost no contact.) As you have heard, Segre (a student of Fermi at Rome in the thirties) urged Owen to follow Fermi when the Los Alamos physics community disbanded in early 1946. It was understood that I would follow Teller. It was because Teller and Fermi (influenced by mutual respect and personal friendship) headed together for Chicago, that Owen and I both started formal graduate study there at the same time.

Fermi loved to teach and immediately organized a private (by invitation only) series of evening informal sessions in which he covered the totality of physics known at the time. All “secret seminar” participants had enjoyed wartime Manhattan-Project contact with Fermi, either at Columbia, Chicago or Los Alamos. Because of the huge impact on my subsequent career from Fermi’s private presentations in the Spring of 1946, I have to suppose that Owen’s career was importantly influenced by Fermi’s unique style of teaching, which was maximally effective in those evening sessions. All Chicago physics graduate students of the forties were exposed to a panoply of regular (credited) courses given by a collection of talented faculty, but those few lucky enough to have met Fermi during the war received an unfair head start.

It was understood that Fermi would be Owen’s research supervisor, but Fermi was renowned both theoretically and experimentally. Would Owen do theoretical or experimental research for his thesis? Owen at first favored pure theory but gradually relinquished that idea and, after passing his exams, settled on studying the scattering of slow neutrons by liquids. Some theory was of course involved but Owen’s thesis research became the familiar battle against contamination of data by unwanted background effects—a battle that thenceforward identified Owen to himself as an experimenter. Owen completed his thesis work in 1949 and returned to Berkeley, after having to overcome nagging questions about the statistical significance of his measurements from Herb Anderson—an earlier Chicago student of Fermi who postwar became there a junior faculty member.

My poor memory has furnished me few personal anecdotes about Owen’s Chicago days, beyond our having shared with several other graduate students a large room in Eckart Hall and many cafeteria lunches in the Commons with Fermi. Contemporary students included Lincoln Wolfenstein, Marshal Rosenbluth, Jack Steinberger, T.D. Lee and Frank Yang. Fermi preferred the Commons to the Faculty Club and I recall a persisting lunchtime cluster around Fermi that regularly included Owen and Murph Goldberger—a theory student with whom I worked closely both then and later. Murph and his wife Mildred had substantial family contact with Owen and Babette.

Fermi left his mark on a collection of students at the University of Chicago in the late forties—a group of which Owen and I were fortunate to be a part.